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FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2120

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1345

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3391

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2777

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000388

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GORKOWSKI)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/24/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KG

SUBJECT: KYRGYZ OFFICIALS OFFENDED BY CROSS ON SWISS FLAG

REF: BISHKEK 195

BISHKEK 00000388 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Posters and billboards advertising the 15th anniversary of Swiss-Kyrgyz cooperation inspired the anger of a Kyrgyz Parliamentarian for their logo, superimposing the Swiss flag (which contains a cross) over the Kyrgyz one. The advertisements then disappeared from Bishkek streets, the Procurator General summoned the Swiss Charge to answer a complaint, and the Government Chief of Staff backed out of addressing the Anniversary event. Public reaction has been mixed. In a meeting with the Ambassador, the Swiss Charge defended the logo, and could think of no reason why the Kyrgyz would choose to exacerbate a controversy with a generous and inoffensive donor country. Coming a week after boisterous and well-attended Orthodox Easter celebrations, this appears to be a bizarre expression of religious intolerance little observed in this usually tolerant majority-Muslim country. END SUMMARY.

War Unlikely, But a Good Thing We're Not in Turkey

¶2. (SBU) For the past month, billboards and posters announcing the 15th anniversary of Swiss-Kyrgyz cooperation have been prominently displayed throughout Bishkek. The advertisements, celebrating the countries' joint achievements and announcing a series of events, show a small, understated logo of the Swiss flag -- a white cross on a red background -- superimposed on the Kyrgyz flag -- a yellow sun on a red background.

¶3. (SBU) On April 21, Askarbek Shadiyev, a Member of Parliament from the majority pro-President Ak Jol party, angrily challenged Prime Minister Chudinov to explain why the Government had allowed the proliferation of Swiss posters showing a cross painted over the Kyrgyz flag. Shadiyev, who hails from southern Kyrgyzstan, said that Parliament had only recently adopted a law barring the defacement of the Kyrgyz flag, and that "if this had been Turkey, there probably would have been a war."

The Swiss: How Did We Offend?

¶4. (C) This Kyrgyz contretemps with the inoffensive Swiss might have been written off as the rantings of an obscurely angry Parliamentarian. However, it appears that the Kyrgyz Government has picked up Shadiyev's gauntlet. In an April 23 meeting with the Ambassador, Swiss Charge Hanspeter Maag said that all of the advertising for the Anniversary event had been taken down the day prior, presumably by the police, and that he had been summoned to (but ultimately did not visit) the Procurator General's Office to answer an official complaint about the logo. Maag added that in response to his complaint to the Foreign Ministry about the summons, they advised him to just ignore it. He also said that the keynote speaker for the evening celebration marking 15 years of cooperation, Government Chief of Staff Nurlan Aitmurzayev, had just abruptly canceled, and was sending his deputy as a substitute.

¶5. (C) The Swiss Charge told the Ambassador that he had released a press statement noting that the logo had been approved by the Kyrgyz National Commission on the State Language, a part of the Office of the President. He also noted that the largest sign had been on Manas Prospect, where President Bakiyev could not have failed to see it twice a day for the past month on his commutes between his office and residence. Maag said that he was considering calling on other Western countries to protest jointly the Kyrgyz Government's actions in taking down the event advertisements, and that he had already sent a diplomatic note in protest to the Foreign Ministry. Prior to his evening speech at the

BISHKEK 00000388 002.2 OF 003

gala event, Maag shared his revised remarks with the Ambassador. His remarks defended the logo, and compared the four parts of the Swiss cross to the four arches in the Kyrgyz flag.

¶6. (C) The Swiss Charge declared himself perplexed by the turn of events, and said that he could think of no reason why the Kyrgyz Government would take such actions against the designedly neutral and inoffensive Swiss. Upon reflection, he half-jokingly came up with one possible reason: Perhaps MP Shadiyev, also the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Budget and Finance, had been rebuffed in his attempt to establish a secret Swiss bank account where he could stash his illegal earnings.

Maybe Parliament is Bored?

¶7. (C) Public reaction to the incident has been mixed. Many commentators have criticized the Swiss for their choice of a logo, but have also expressed shame at the ingratitudo shown to a country that has invested 200 million dollars in the Kyrgyz economy over the past 15 years, and suggested that Parliamentarians should have better things to do with their time. Another commentator noted that the service badge of the Kyrgyz Customs Service is a four-pointed star -- in effect, a cross -- superimposed over the Kyrgyz flag, and that if the government itself "defaces" the Kyrgyz flag, perhaps the Swiss should be cut some slack.

Gala Event Goes On -- Defiantly with Crosses Abundant

¶8. (U) The Ambassador attended the gala event that evening. Finding it was a bit tricky as there were no posters indicating it at the entrance. On stage, however, spectators were greeted by two gigantic flags, one Kyrgyz and the other Swiss -- white cross defiantly two stories high. Kyrgyz children performed folk songs and danced, merrily fluttering Swiss flags aloft -- complete with crosses. The two Kyrgyz announcers made an oblique reference to the controversy,

urging the audience: "Look, how nice it is that our children are carrying the flag of our friends the Swiss high!"

¶9. (C) The Charge was the opposite of oblique. He inserted a whole paragraph in his speech along the lines of what he had previewed for the Ambassador, but adding a bitter complaint at this insult to the Swiss flag. The audience appeared ignorant of the controversy. As for the reaction of the Government's Chief of Staff's deputy, who duly spoke after Maag, it was hard to gauge, as in a surprise move, he spoke exclusively in Kyrgyz. At the reception afterwards, the usually placid Charge wondered aloud to the Ambassador if he was becoming paranoid or was the lack of advance notice on the language of the government speech (thus preventing Maag from procuring an interpreter from Kyrgyz into Russian and English) was also part of some dark anti-Swiss plot. The Ambassador also noted the paucity of official Kyrgyz attendees at the event.

Comment: Is Muslim Intolerance Rising?

¶10. (C) This issue could be interpreted as a Government attempt to exploit or to placate rising Muslim religious intolerance, in line with recent warnings we have received from government officials on increasing Islamic extremism in the country, particularly in the south, from which the "offended" Parliamentarian hails. However, last week's widely-disseminated Presidential congratulations to Christians on Orthodox Easter, along with widely and freely attended boisterous Easter services argue against an upsurge in anti-Christian prejudice. Alternatively, this could simply be the hyper-sensitive Government not wanting to be seen as unresponsive to a symbolic slight. The bottom line

BISHKEK 00000388 003.2 OF 003

is that there is very little reason for the Kyrgyz not to like what the Swiss are doing. Unlike U.S. assistance programs, which periodically arouse the Government's suspicions (reftel), the Swiss largely focus on economic development, and the Kyrgyz Government generally welcomes their projects both publicly and privately.
GFOELLER